

Remembering Christmas 1906

This article is the last in a bicentennial year series for The Link by WHBC Historian Bonnie Healy.

It's coming on Christmas, and the bicentennial year is ending. It seems appropriate to end where we began our celebration in October 2014 with the romantic and tragic tale of the Mc/MacFarlanes.

Their story is somehow central to the history of West Henrietta Baptist in its message of enduring Christian relationship and caring. That they left an impression is clear to anyone who sees Elizabeth McFarlane's window by the organ in the sanctuary and studies the portraits of the Rev. J.C. and Mrs. Elizabeth McFarlane in the Elizabeth McFarlane Memorial Class in the Fellowship Hall.

The McFarlanes arrived in West Henrietta from their native Canada in September 1904, in time for the 37-year-old minister to begin classes at the Rochester Theological School then located at East Avenue and Alexander Street. Elizabeth and their two young daughters, Jean, 3, and Gracie, 2, took up residence in the parsonage. During the week, J.C. boarded at the dormitory on Alexander Street.

The following fall, Elizabeth organized and taught the Ruth and Esther Class of women. It was wildly popular.

A year of family, church, and academic life passed. J.C. began his third and final year of seminary, and Elizabeth continued raising the girls and teaching the Ruth and Esther Class.

Shortly before Christmas 1906, Elizabeth began feeling tired.



ELIZABETH MCFARLANE

Her condition worsened. On Christmas Eve, the 40-year-old pastor's wife died.

What must be remembered is how the church scrambled to help that Christmas Eve. There were little girls and a grief-numb widower to feed, a dead body to wash and dress and lay to rest in a new coffin for transport to her hometown of Berlin, Ontario, where she would be buried with her Mennonite ancestors. That painful Christmas Eve may well have been one of the brightest hours in WHBC history.

Yet it seems looking at the whole story, that the tender love extended that holy night was not the end of the church's care for Rev. McFarlane. He finished his studies and returned to Canada to minister the following fall. However, the matchmakers who loved him still in Henrietta would not rest. In the fall of 1908, he returned to Henrietta



Photo courtesy Jacquelyn MacFarlane

MELLICENT FENNER MCFARLANE

and married Mellicent McNall Fenner at her Sunny Crest home on Lehigh Station Road.

Mellicent was the DNA heart of the church, descended from Rev. Thomas Gorton, the first pastor; Michael Brininstool, the first deacon; the McNalls, the Remingtons, the Martins and the Fenners. She was the heart they were willing to give to restore his joy, although she too would die young at 42.

After Mellicent's death in 1922, the church once more reached out to their beloved pastor, who by then had changed the spelling of his name to MacFarlane. They brought him back as minister, giving him a home to grieve, a home that loved him well and the one place on earth that had known and loved both Elizabeth McFarlane and their own Mellicent MacFarlane.